MONROE & CONSCIOUSNESS

Several thousand people gather in this special place each year to expand their consciousness. They come from all over the country and from overseas. They come in groups of about 25 for workshops lasting up to six days. Large companies send valued employees to it. It is one of the foremost centers for training people to achieve different levels of consciousness in the United States. It lies in the beautiful foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Nelson County about 25 miles southwest of Charlottesville. This special place is the Monroe Institute (TMI).

Many people have been drawn to TMI after reading the influential books and listening to the unusual tapes or CDs from its founder Robert Monroe. Monroe is no longer with us, having, in his own words, left his body for good to assume another form of conscious being in 1995. Before he left he clearly defined TMI's mission to enable people to quickly expand their consciousness.

There are many approaches to changing consciousness. Alcohol and drugs seem to be the quickest and easiest way to get into a different state of consciousness, but they tend to harm the body, are short-lived, and generally negative in the long run. Other, more constructive, approaches include meditation, breath-work, bio-feedback, sport, therapy, channeling, rebirthing, hypnosis, various types of yoga, various kinds of movement, different foods, remote viewing, various psychic powers such as clairvoyance, sacred quests. Many of these approaches are somewhat hit and miss and, unlike TMI's expeditious way, can take years to master.

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It may be easier to understand the work undertaken at TMI if we first explore what Monroe understood by the word consciousness. Bob Monroe was not alone in his beliefs that we can develop various levels of consciousness. The most comprehensive explanations of consciousness have been documented by Ken Wilber. Never heard of him? Not surprising. Wilber is not well known because he rarely agrees to be interviewed. He's a recluse who just researches and writes, largely about consciousness, and such subjects as the relationship between science and spirit. Most people only know Wilber through

his 13 or so books of which *Spectrum of Consciousness* was his first path-breaking effort written when he was 23 years old about 25 years ago. From a wide variety of sources, Wilber documented 9 or 10 (depending on how you count) levels of consciousness,

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from birth to that consciousness achieved by advanced enlightened souls of whom there are very few in the West. There are more of them in the East. Most of us reach Wilber's 5th or 6th level and then stop our consciousness development .

Wilber identified three ways in which humans are conscious of reality. First, using the *eye of the flesh (empiricism)*, the physical seeing-eye on which we base our scientific observation, our science in general. This first eye generates truth but does not tell us what's good or bad. Second, *the eye of the mind (rationalism)*, the "eye" we use to construct music, art, mathematics, philosophy and religion, the latter being a force to generate meaning and values. The third eye, the *eye of contemplation (mysticism)*, is an eye few of us get to see through because few of us reach the necessary upper levels of consciousness. Some of the saints, yogis, zen masters, shamans, and other mystics have seen a different reality through this contemplative eye and, regardless of their background, all agree on its features. Their experiences include a profound knowledge of all levels of reality including the physical, mental, soul and spiritual. They know bliss and the transmental, transrational and transpersonal experiences of oneness, direct awareness beyond the five senses. These are experiences the rest of us poor mortals may only glimpse occasionally, if at all.*

Our religions as we know them seem unable to take us beyond the eye of the mind, or Wilber's stage five or six. Those teachers who try to move our consciousness along and into other realms, such as divine love, offer most of their predominantly rational appeals to our ego. Wilber takes consciousness development several levels beyond ego. And he walks his talk, having been there himself and being able to go there at will. He realized this through meditation and the help of spiritually advanced teachers from various traditions.

Like Wilber, Bob Monroe, believed there were various levels of consciousness but approached consciousness research differently. He first experienced them spontaneously and thought he might be going nuts. These experiences did not seem to involve any of his five senses. Monroe's levels of consciousness do not match Wilber's, but resonate authentically with many people who have experienced them.

Convincing himself he was sound of mind and a sound professional (he started a radio station in New York), Bob Monroe tried to relate his unusual experiences of different levels of consciousness to various qualities of sound. He theorized that if he could relate a particular quality or level of consciousness to a specific quality of sound then he might be able to enter into these states at will by using sound as a cue. Various experiments, mostly on himself and his friends, led to his discovery of sound-to-consciousness-level relationships. Once he understood the relationship between sound qualities and consciousness levels he predicted other people could be induced to experience various levels of consciousness using various types of sound. He satisfied himself and others that such a relationship existed and proceeded to run workshops on the topic, inviting the public to participate. One of Monroe's breakthroughs was to enable some people to achieve almost instantaneous advances or changes in consciousness without the years of meditative practice advised by advanced souls. He further suggested that once these levels of consciousness had been learned using sound effects, people could quickly train themselves to enter different specific states of consciousness without the sound prop.

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After his own personal experiences with different levels of consciousness Robert Monroe came to believe consciousness was not located in the brain. In other words, consciousness could continue even when the brain is dead. This belief also suggests that consciousness can be experienced out of the body, even while it is alive. Much of Monroe's work was devoted to proving this and enabling other people to experience it.

A group of Dutch doctors recently came close to acknowledging the truth of Monroe's belief. They decided to research the phenomenon of people reporting on finding themselves outside their body when close to death or when actually dead. They interviewed 344 people who were resuscitated after a cardiac arrest in 10 Dutch hospitals. They interviewed them again two and eight years later. Dr Pim van Lommel of the Hospital Rijnstate in Arnham, found that 62% of patients who had been clinically dead told of a near-death experience. Half of the 62% reported being aware of being dead and experienced positive emotions. 31% said they were aware of moving through a tunnel and 29% observed a celestial landscape. 15% had an out of body experience and 8% saw their life reviewed. The doctors said the near-death experiences were not related to medication.

The doctors concluded from this research that the currently accepted concept of consciousness and memories being localized in the brain may need re-examination. They are close to agreeing with Bob Monroe that some aspect of our being is conscious beyond the death of the body. Or as Monroe puts it, we can experience consciousness in some form independent of the body. Many, but by no means all, of the participants at TMI experience such phenomena.

There will be more discussion of the Monroe Institute and its approach to consciousness in future Echo articles.

* For a more fuller explanation of Wilber's three eyes, see his book "Eye to Eye."